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Keeping Secrets

By Ray Jenkins

DURING a brief time in government a few years ago, I enjoyed a "top secret" security clearance. It was scarcely a great honor, inasmuch as it was shared to one degree or another by four million of my countrymen, including John A. Walker Jr., who now sits in a Baltimore jail cell accused of selling secrets to the Russians.

Security clearances are bestowed in many forms for many reasons. A guard at the reception desk of a sensitive defense industry may have a "top secret" clearance, even though he may not have the foggiest notion of what goes on in the offices which he guards. Others may possess only bits and pieces of highly technical information necessary to do their jobs, and a bit may be useless without a piece.

With all those people walking around keeping secrets, no wonder some ranking figures in government, including Sen. Sam Nunn of Georgia and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, believe that far too many people have such clearances.

My own experience tells me they are right, but I would say further, too many people have the authority to classify material and often exercise that authority for the wrong reasons.

I got my clearance because I had access to a vast amount of information – CIA reports and the like – which fell into various classifications, from "confidential" to "top secret." As I read the material that crossed my desk it became readily apparent that a great deal of "classifying" was done more to nourish bureaucratic egos than to protect government security. I have seen, for example, idle gossip and chit-chat in "classified" diplomatic cables. Once I even saw a clipping from the Washington Post in a "secret" file.

One anecdote might be instructive.

As I was about to leave government I got a call from an agency which must remain nameless lest I violate the national security laws. I was informed that some months earlier I had received, unsolicited, a numbered copy of a set of very sensitive documents, which the agency would like to retrieve since I had no further use for them.

For the life of me I could not remember receiving the documents, but I promised to locate and return them. As I went through the ritual of office-cleaning the documents were not to be found. With a growing sense of urgency the agency called again and again. When it became apparent that I could not find the documents, there were menacing suggestions that an investigation might be in order.

Finally to my great relief I found the missing papers, locked securely in a cabinet; the seal had never been broken.

By this time I was sufficiently curious that I put my clearance to one last use to learn the nature of this sensitive information which had caused such alarm. As I read I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Again, I must be cautious, but suffice it to say that the material dealt with contingency plans. This agency had spent God knows how many dollars and hours putting the daydreams of bureaucratic specialists into writing which was then sanctified as "secret."

What was accomplished by this? Well, I suppose a case could be made that if we had a contingency plan for providing emergency electric service to Denver in case of a nuclear attack, the Russians ought not know about it. So there was a legitimate "national security" purpose. But a bigger purpose, I suspect, was that if the papers had fallen into the hands of a sensation-seeking columnist like Jack Anderson, he would have had a field day terrifying the populace.

I could cite still other instances where classification clearly was used to cover a foible or to protect someone from embarrassment rather than to protect a genuine national interest.

The point is, legitimate government secrecy becomes trivialized when all kinds of bureaucrats are running around with rubber stamps marked "secret." When technology becomes militarized, there's probably an irreducible minimum number of people who must have access to vital secrets, but there's hardly any doubt that too many people classify too much material too often for the wrong reasons.